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Bednarick, Tracy Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Tracy Bednarick
May 23, 1996

"But I think really Holland isn't a great town for
big drastic change." -Robert Visscher

An informal parade marched down 8th street August 15, 1945 to celebrate the end of World War II. This was followed by a V-J parade the next day (Vande Water 79). Two years later, Holland celebrated it's Centennial year. In the past fifty years, Holland has gone from a small city of 25,000 people to a metropolitan of over 110,000 people living in the several smaller communities and townships joined under the Greater Holland name, 35,000 of these people live in the city of Holland alone. In the year of 1996, it is possible to look back through time to see how much Holland has changed and yet, in a way, has also stayed the same.

With the end of World War II, Holland, like many American cities, faced a massive influx of returning veterans. This increase of people provided both positive and negative situations for which the town had to deal with. In the late 1940s, there was such an increase in the amount of veterans returning to Holland that the block where the Cappon and Bertsch Tannery was located at, had to be converted to serve as temporary housing. Counseling services were also set up for the veterans to help them get used to life after the war (Holland Sentinel October 21, 1946).

Enrollment at Hope College went from a mere 400 in 1945 to 1,200 in 1947. There were 533 veterans attending the school at this time (Massie). Dr. Paul Fried jokes that the college went from a school where few women could find a man for a date to a school full of lonely men. A massive building effort went into effect aided by the Federal Housing

Authority to provide living areas for all the new students. Their enrollment was made possible by a sliding tuition and enrollment plan. Students returning from the war could enter the school at the time they got back with no matter to the point at where the school was in the term. For example, a vet could start college on November 24, if he so desired. The sliding tuition plan also made it possible for returning veterans to pay for school when the money became available.

Post-war America faced a meat shortage, causing a seven week hiatus on pig slaughtering at the Holland Meat Co. The Holland Sentinel was filled with advertisements for grocery stores. Each store tried to explain the meat shortage and asked customers to understand that meat was hard to come by. Despite the overcrowding and the present tensions abroad life in Holland after the war went on as normally as possible.

Holland felt the polio threat of the 1950s in the same way most American cities did. Newspaper clippings from the time documented several cases in the Holland area, spoke of possible cures, and publicized community groups that were raising money to help the victims of the disease.

Hunting season triumphs dominated the Holland Sentinel, along with the local philanthropic group, the Community Chest's progress on their Chain o' Dimes project, an effort to create the longest chain of dimes possible. The money from this charity fund-raiser was used to throw a party for the children of the community every Halloween night to keep the kids from playing pranks in their neighborhoods. The Klompen dancers, high school girls who danced the traditional Dutch dances in wooden shoes and costumes, preformed in New York and the community gathered together to plant the thousands of tulips that would line the streets for the annual Tulip Time. On November 19, 1950 the Sunday beer and wine

ban that we still know today went into effect. Two days later, Holland's first Rollarenia had its grand opening. Mobile homes were placed at the Tannery to provide homes for the continuing needs of the veterans. After a long wait, in June of 1951, natural gas heating came to Holland.

Russ's Restaurant really took off after the war. As Russel Bouws said in an interview in 1977, "after the war people's habits changed and they started eating out more." (Watson and Vande Water). In 1947, the Holland Tulip City Airport first started operating (Van Reken, L.). Mr. G.W. Haworth risked it all in 1948, by leaving his teaching career of eleven years to start a small manufacturing job shop (Harvey). His skill, commitment and devotion has made the Haworth Company into the giant office partition manufacturer it is today. Then in 1951, Parke Davis and Co., a chemical manufacturing plant, established itself in the Holland community. Business was moving in, but not quite fast enough.

The world was changing and Holland wanted to keep up. The automobile had taken over, the world was mobil, and going global. The city recognized the need for jobs and the future needs of the community as they saw the "baby-boom" become a reality. In 1953, the City of Holland presented its Master Plan for the city. It was realized in this plan that Holland could not remain static. Not only would the city have no possibility for moving forward, it would be causing potential doom to itself if it did not change. Holland was going to change whether the people liked it or not, either they could help it along or they could suffer the consequences.

Cities can no longer remain static. They will either decline or progress. Unfortunately there are very definite reasons why Holland cannot achieve such a goal unless every citizen accepts

the mature responsibility of finding out why this is so, what can be done about it, and then insuring that the proper continuing coordinated policy decisions shall be made from today and from year to year (Bagby 1).

The Holland citizens choose to be the ones in control. Holland decided to move forward with all aspects of living.

The biggest concern of the Plan was business growth in the Holland community. Business was and is extremely important to the community in more ways than one. One major aspect that the Plan emphasized dealt with the interaction of business and the tax base of the community. It explained that businesses and industries make up the taxes that are the difference between what is needed by the community and what is provided by the residents of the community. These taxes supported both community services and education. Without business, which Holland was losing at this time, a city faces the threat of either going bankrupt or being forced to cut services severely. To prevent this, the Master Plan introduced some possible solutions for increasing the amount of industry in Holland. The Plan proposed one area of the community to be devoted solely to the purpose of industrial use. It emphasized that the land should provide both area to expand and room for ample parking. While the need for industry was recognized, it didn't really offer specific solutions for how bring new firms to Holland, beside simply stating that it need to be done. It really seemed to offer the hope that industry would come and save Holland on its own. It did, however, encourage old businesses that were run down to either shape up, or beware of the possibility of being bought out by stronger businesses.

The Plan also dealt quite extensively with the maintenance and up keep of the streets, parks, and residential areas. The Plan presented the ideal that Holland should be a town free from "urban blight," known as a deterioration of established residential areas, and "suburban sprawl," a cutting up of the land on the edges of the city into small worthless plots. The Plan asked people to consider buying up decrepid homes in order to secure their upkeep. It encouraged the city to find ways to purchase large tracts of land outside the city, so that this land would stay together. If the land were to be divided up in small chunks, when it was needed for something it would not be able to be used, because many owners would have to be dealt with and it would be immensely complicated trying to get all the land back together again. The Plan also spoke of the importance of parks, especially what the Plan termed as "buffer parks, " whose purpose was to help provide for a transition between the residential areas and the industrial areas. One can notice these in Holland today in Prospect, Kollen, and Smallenburg Parks. The Plan also proposed the building of several new schools and a civic center. These were two things needed for the fulfillment of the growing needs of the community. This desire to maintain Holland's beauty and upkeep still exist today, as can be seen in the beautification programs, the Holland Historic District, and portions of the Weed and Seed Program.

Extensive attention was given to the problem of roads and the increasing use of the automobile. The Plan proposers stated that it was best to keep the majority of traffic on just a few roads in Holland. They felt that by keeping traffic flow out of residential and business areas it would increase safety and reduce annoying industrial traffic going through these areas. The way to make this happen, the Plan stated, was through bypasses and highways

that would act as main roads for the community. These roads changed along with US-31, River, Chicago Drive, Ottawa, and more recently I-196. All noticeably busy streets.

One of the major concerns of the Plan was the effect that the increase in population was having on the downtown district. Holland was quickly becoming less of a centrally located community. Doctors and dentists moved off 8th street, along with most of the auto dealerships and grocery stores. Most of the drugstores closed, leaving only Model Drug. Two theaters were torn down; The Warm Friend Tavern and Hotel converted into apartments (Lozon 3-19). The Plan spoke of the need to bring the downtown area back to life. This was to happen thirty years later.

November 16-17, 1954, one part of the Plan was realized with the opening of the Holland Civic Center. The Civic Center was the first thing that really materialized out of the Master Plan. The celebration had a wide variety of entertainment, from dancing to the racing of go-carts in the parking lot (Vande Water 95).

The Master Plan may have seemed like an answer to all Holland's questions, but in all reality it was hard to pull it off without one important asset: money. Holland's largest employer, The Holland Furnace Company, was steadily going under. The failing of the business stemmed from an refusal to design new furnaces that could really compete with the smaller more efficient furnaces of other companies. In addition to this, the Federal Trade Commission levied charges that developed out of the allegations that Holland Furnace Company representatives were replacing broken furnaces that could have been easily repaired (Urbane and Massie). In addition to this the sales people would often fabricate problems that did not exist. People felt that they were being swindled. By on May 27, 1966

all production of furnace parts stopped (Van Reken and Vande Water 210). The question still remained, "How would the city be able to make the plan happen?"

Nevertheless, though the master plan was big and idealistic, the foresight of it for dealing with the problems before they got out of hand markedly contributed to why we have the Holland that we do today. Naturally not everything could be done at once, so in 1960, a sort of progress report and continuing goal statement was issued (Bagby 2). Already the city had begun to realize that they had underestimated the possible population increase. In 1958, Holland had moved the boundaries of the city, increasing the size of the city and school district by 6 square miles, a four fold increase in the area of the city. The annexation of surrounding townships brought 1/3 more people under the services of Holland City. So in essence, while it had started the ball rolling in providing services and employment to the people in need, the plan in fact had given the city more people to provide for. Holland High School built a new building that opened January 29, 1962. The strain of building a new school became evident the next year when the Holland City News reported that all sports, except for football and basketball, had to be cut due to lack of funds. The need for money to provide services to the community remained. The question of how to provide better jobs and increase the tax base of the community became even more important. One can picture the "koffe kletzes" that occurred all over the community filled with people brainstorming on how to get Holland going. The ideas in the master plan were great, but the city needed action. The first sign of the action came when Clarence Jalving and Mayor Nelson Bosman consulted the Michigan Department of Economic Development with the question of creating an industrial area on the south side of Holland (Massie). Not everyone in the community

embraced this idea; some worried that an increase in industry would further deplete the businesses of the downtown (Massie 100). But despite this, in June 1963, the Holland Economic Development Corporation (HEDCOR) was formed with the purpose of expanding and servicing the Holland area in all matters of economic development (Chamber of Commerce Archives Collection). This community group began and still is today independent of any government group and relies solely on the funds of the community and its members' support. The organization does, however, maintain close ties with the Holland Chamber of Commerce. Their first community fund raiser, despite the initial opposition, was able to raise enough money to start Holland's Southside Industrial Park (C of C Collection). The Lifesavers Confectionery Factory, in 1969, was the first plant to move into the park. The Southside Industrial Park is now home to 52 businesses which employ over 9,000 people (C of C collection). Some of these businesses are: Brooks Beverage Management, Inc., Haworth Inc., Holland Hitch Company, Thermotron Industries, Trans-Matic Mfg., Inc., S2 Yachts, Inc., and Sligh Furniture Company. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, HEDCOR rose again to create the Northside Industrial Park. Located in the Holland Charter Township, this plant is home to such corporations as: Request Foods, Inc., Donnelly Corporation, Dell Engineering, Inc., Fogg, Great Lake Woods, Inc., and Pleuco Technologies.

The Tulip Time festival continued to be a mainstay for the community, gaining wider and wider national and international popularity. The other non-Dutch cultures in Holland even began to get involved with the celebration of the Dutch ways. This, even more prevalent today, can be seen in the fact that a good many klompen dancers lack the usual

blonde hair and Dutch build. This doesn't seem to matter, it is the fun and the traditional good old Dutch ideals that count.

Carter Brown, in 1961, suggested that the city of Holland should have their very own Dutch windmill. Willard Wichers, director of the Midwest Office of the Netherlands Information Service, devoted much time and energy to the difficult task of receiving permission from the Dutch government to remove a windmill from the Netherlands. Holland's DeZwaan windmill was the last windmill to leave the Netherlands due to the national monument status of the Netherlands' Windmills. In October 1964, the authentic windmill was delivered in pieces at the shore of Lake Macatawa to be put back together on the grounds of the future Windmill Island (Timmermann). The attraction opened April 10, 1965. Michigan Governor George Romney and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands pulled the rope releasing the blades of the 200 year old windmill named "De Zwaan."

As Holland became more industrial, long time traditions slowly began to change. Shops stayed open on Wednesday afternoons, Sabbath observances became less strict, and lesser known "blue laws" fell by the wayside. Holland began to "succumb" to more mainstream practices as the town moved forward. Yet, the town also held strongly to their moral traditions, as any visitor can see today in the large number of churches and some of the closed shops of the downtown on Sunday. In fact, as the town continues to change, debate is wide and often intense concerning how close the city of Holland should stay tied to the church. This is an issue that is very close to the hearts of many Holland citizens who fear that as they see their community change to become more like mainstream society they also see sin infiltrating its way into the city. Some preachers go as far as to say that by

opening their shops on Sundays, shop owners are blatantly disregarding the Bible, and thus causing a great sin. This sin, some citizens still worry could lead to the demise of the currently prosperous Holland community. (Chanski).

The racial make-up of Holland was also changing. The 90% Dutch community of 1950 gave way to a rising population of Hispanic citizens. Many members of this community had been lured by agricultural opportunities in the areas around Holland. Once here, however, many Hispanics found jobs in the increasing number of successful factories. With solid jobs, they have been able to bring family members to the area. From reading the oral histories of some of their immigrants, found in the Joint Archives of Holland at Hope College, it seems that the new life in Holland has not always been easy. While many have found employment, they still speak of discrimination in the work-place. Discrimination has also been prevalent in housing. We can see today the divisions of Holland based on ethnicity and the different divisions of living groups based on culture. This may, however, not be a total fault of discrimination; this grouping of culture may in fact have helped people of common backgrounds to work together to assimilate to a new environment. The immigrants of Holland may have grouped this way on purpose, or maybe not. Only they know.

Latin Americans have taken active roles in the community. The Latin American Society formed in 1966 and later evolved into Latin Americans United for Progress (LAUP) in 1974 (Laup Newsletter Year 1, Number 7). Both these groups worked to help Hispanics in Holland have a stronger role in the community. In addition to this, the LAUP organization has been a resource for support and services for the Hispanic community in Holland. LAUP also throws an annual festival that celebrates their Hispanic heritage. The

group is also well known for the scholarships they offer Hispanic students who wish to further their education. More recently formed is The Lakeshore Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. This organization, started by Luis Robolledo in June of 1993, works with the Holland Chamber of Commerce and serves as a resource for minorities in business in the Holland community, those looking for jobs, and those wishing to start their own businesses. The organization also provides translation services and education opportunities (DeBraber).

One member of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Fred Rodriguez said, "The Dutch community here gives people a chance to be someone. It's a very open community. There is a tremendous opportunity in Holland for all types of people." (DeBraber) As early as 1970, there has been a blending of the so called "Dutch" culture with that of the Hispanic culture. For example, on January 31, 1970, Reverend Frank Pott became pastor of the Spanish speaking Christian Reformed Church (Holland Sentinel, Dec 1970).

Unfortunately, there has also been an "us and them" attitude that has existed in the citizens of Holland. The minority and majority accept the presence of the other, but they seem to see the other group as much different from themselves. In an article published in 1989, by Joyce Rapier entitled "The Black Populace is Growing Here," she seems to talk about the African-Americans in the community as something to be studied. It is somewhat funny that she writes about what churches they go to, where they work, and what they do for fun (Programs Edition Holland Sentinel 1/31/89). The necessity for an article like this is, however, evident in the general lack of knowledge many of the citizens of the Holland community must have had concerning minority cultures at that time considering that people of Caucasian background had been the majority for so long.

Recently more Asian and Vietnamese families have also been finding a home in Holland (Massie). About 1,250 Laotians live in Holland today. The differences in the Laotian culture, sometimes clashes with the American in Holland, but both groups are working together (Sanchez). Evident from the increasing number of newspaper articles, is a sense that the Holland community is really working toward a greater racial harmony. This comes after pitfalls, but is very possible.

Holland in the 1980s was in for another change; a change in the name of continuing progress. After the community had dealt with the major idea of the Master Plan, increasing industry, attention was turned toward the downtown area. HEDCOR had taken the problem of industry and run with it. In 1981, they expanded their role to become part of the planning for the revitalization of the downtown area, which was feeling more and more threatened by the idea of an incoming mall. The Mainstreet Holland organization was formed early in 1986 to come up with specific plans for the renovation of Holland's downtown. Some of the first assistance that the downtown received from this group was in the form of loan incentives. The money from these loans was used by several businesses to give their storefronts a "facelift" (Pullano A9). Edgar Prince and his wife, Elsa, of the factory giant by the same name were the main financial contributors to the downtown program. They later set up the Lumir Corporation that manages the downtown prospects today.

In the summer of 1988, the renovation of 8th street began. The streets were torn up in order to install a streetscape snowmelt system, accommodate larger angle parking spaces, and place brick side walks. With antique style lights, benches, and information kiosks the idea was to give Holland a "new" turn of the century look while still preserving the rich

historical architecture. Parking meters that were placed downtown in 1949 were removed. Unfortunately the construction shut down most of the downtown area for the entire summer and many businesses lost a large amount of sales. At the same time, Westshore Mall opened. People found it easier and more attractive to go to the new mall than to deal with the inconvenience of the construction downtown. Some businesses downtown even closed up during this time (Lozon A11). Shop-owners became worried that even the streetscape plan would not be able to save their business, but in the winter of 1988 the construction was done and Holland had a new downtown. Today, we can see a downtown that is once again back on its feet. In fact, in 1990 the amount of businesses increased in downtown enough to decrease the cost of the snowmelt system from \$10 per frontage foot to a little over \$8 per frontage foot (Sentinel staff A1). Bronze statues have more recently been added to the downtown area. These increase both the charm and meaning of the main-street. One special group of statues feature bronze footsteps to honor Edgar Prince, the man who really helped make the downtown what it is today. His bronzed footsteps lead up to a bronze plaque that commemorates his contribution to the downtown by stating, "We will always hear your footsteps." Above the plaque, one can find a sculpture of musicians playing instruments and music plays in the background (Gmiter). Today, even in the winter when on very cold days shoppers walk through the fog created by the unnaturally warm side walks, Holland's downtown area attracts many tourists and residents alike.

With the addition of a new post office in November of 1985, Holland continued its commitment to the beauty of the downtown area. The location of the Chamber of Commerce business and information office, in 1988, along with the nearby revitalization of the bus and

train station further strengthened the downtown area. More recently the town has worked on renovating 7th street and has plans to overhaul 9th street in the summer of 1996, despite the worries of many citizens that it will severally disrupt the downtown traffic. Many are concerned for the vitality of the businesses that will be difficult to get to, but the need for the upkeep of the street is also evident in the condition of the street (Tunison).

In addition to the preserving of the downtown, the city also has worked to preserve the wetland/waterfront area on the Macatawa River behind 6th street. This continuing project which began in the mid-80s has created Window on the Waterfront. A boardwalk, viewing deck, and floating dock were created to make the area accessible to visitors looking to enjoy a step away from the city (Berger). On a typical summer morning one can see birds land near the river, hear frogs croaking in the marshes, or perhaps even be entranced by a butterfly. Unfortunately, the area has been victim to vandalism on a regular basis and great cost and attention has been paid to repair the constant damage (Anderson). In addition, the smell from the nearby sewage plant does tend to be bothersome. However, the majority of Holland citizens feel a strong commitment to continue the beautification of Holland, even when some choose to try to destroy it. Window on the Waterfront may soon be entering a second phase of development that would make the park even more multi-functional; it could, perhaps, even contain an amphitheater to be used for outdoor performances (Gmitter 2). Along with the DeGraaf Nature Center that began operating in the 70s, Window on the Waterfront, the dunes and beaches, and Holland's abundance of parks, Holland has created many wonderful recreation areas.

As a newcomer to the Holland community, I find it amazing how much the citizens of Holland are willing to get involved within the functions of their city. Many of the advancements that Holland has made in the last 50 years would have not been possible without the substantial private donations that business leaders, families, and individuals have invested in these projects. The citizens of Holland seem to look out for each other and seem to be a very "welcoming" community. This can be seen in the greeting smiles on the faces of Holland citizens as you walk down the street. There is an intense pride that the citizens of Holland have for their city. This is understandable, when you consider what the Holland citizens have put into their city there is no excuse for them to not to be proud.

Hope College, along with the rest of the community, has also prospered. In 1956, the Nykerk Music Hall opened. Since 1950, the building of dormitories and the acquisition of "cottages" has been fairly constant to accommodate for an increasing number of students. Van Zoeren Library opened in 1961 to later become the Van Zoeren Hall in 1988. Calvin A. VanderWerf replaced Irwin J. Lubbers as president of the college in 1961. The Physics Mathematics Hall opened in 1964; it was renamed in 1981 as the VanderWerf Hall of Physics and Math. The Wichers addition to Nykerk Hall was completed in 1970 and in 1972 Gordon J. Van Wylen was elected Hope College's ninth president. One year later, Peale Science Center opened. In 1978, the Dow Health and Fitness center opened its doors. DePree art center was dedicated in 1982 and in 1986 the Maas Student and Conference Center was constructed. John H. Jacobson, Jr. became the president in 1987 and in 1988 the Van Wylen library was dedicated which contains the Joint Archives of Holland. From this immense list of new buildings on Hope's campus in the last 50 years, one can see the

evidence of progress. The increasing number of students enrolled in the college is further evidence of the success of the college. And much of this progress for Hope College has been very recent. Hope continues to move ahead, as Hope looks to the future it finds that the new Haworth Conference Center and Cook Residence Hall will soon be completed on its grounds.

Holland's reputation and its commitment to that reputation seems to be one of the driving forces behind the town's success. As one citizen said, "Once you start something, you have a responsibility to keep it up" (Joint Archives of Holland Vertical File on Holland, Michigan Downtown Area). Holland certainly has done a lot to "keep it up." This distinctness of Holland has also seemed to attract a good amount of dignitaries to the area. The royalty of the Netherlands occasionally visit. Princess Margriet and her husband, Peiter, celebrated Holland's 125th anniversary here September 9, 1972 (Vande Water). The predominately Republican community has been visited by Ronald Reagan, Barbara Bush, and George Bush (twice). In addition to these people, Hope College brings in note-worthy people every year, adding to the culture and diversity of Holland.

Holland is a strong city, a town rich in history, and a community with a future. The people of Holland have worked hard to make their city more than a city, but a place to call home. It hasn't always been easy, but the success of Holland shows its worth. Holland will continue to change as it grows into the future. And the people of Holland will most certainly guarantee its success. Change in Holland seems to have been around for awhile. Holland may appear to change slowly, but it is a changing community.

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